THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

YOUR LIFE'S WORK

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We ask to know the will of God without guessing that his will is written into our very beings. We perceive that will when we discern our gifts. Our obedience and surrender to God are in large part our obedience and surrender to our gifts.... Our gifts are on loan. We are responsible for spending them in the world, and we will be held accountable. Though it may seem that God leaves us and is not concerned with what we do with our lives – this is not the case. Even though we feel God is away a long time – the absent God – we perceive God's presence in the consequences of our actions.

Elizabeth O'Connor
Eighth Day of Creation

FOURTH
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YOUR LIFE'S WORK

Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

"Here am I; send me!" Isaiah 6:8

Dear God, we are inundated by voices clamoring for our attention, to tell us the news, to persuade us to buy or be or do or come or go; voices that we want to hear and many voices that we do not want to hear, but must hear. And now we have come here to hear a word from you: the word you have for us today. Speak that word to us, in the midst of the words and thoughts and ideas we will share in this time together, and startle us with your truth, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

* * *

In the center of Florence there is an ancient building which sits opposite the Cathedral, the Duomo, one of the most beloved structures in the world. The building is the Baptistry, octagonal in shape, where the earliest Christian worship took place in Florence and where baptisms have occurred since the early middle ages.

People come to see the Duomo with its famous dome by Brunelleschi and they come to see the great doors to the Baptistry. I saw them last week. In fact, I saw them several times: I kept coming back to them. They are bronze, probably 10 - 12 feet high and the individual panels depict scenes from the Old Testament and the life of Jesus.

They are astounding. Every detail is in place: each panel tells an entire story with warmth and passion and humanness and sometimes a sense of humor. Noah's drunkenness, for instance, is expressed in a small figure collapsed, with his head beneath what is clearly a Florentine Chianti cask.

The doors are the work of a Florentine artist and sculptor, Lorenzo Ghiberti, who lived from 1378 until 1455. What kept me returning to Ghiberti's doors was the fact that he worked on them all his adult life. He received the commission when he was 25 and worked on the doors until he was 74, 49 years. Finally he stopped working on the doors and not long after, he died.

He did a lot of other things too. He painted and sculpted and had a family and lots of friends and traveled and generally enjoyed his life. But the doors were his focus, the common thread that ran through his whole life.

Actually it was a good friend who stood with me, quietly looking at the doors and said, "Wouldn't it be something to be able to create something and at the end of the day be able to point to it and say, there – that is my life's work?"

I think sometimes that the greatest gift of all is knowing what your life's work is and the privilege of being able to do it.

I know that the decision about what to do with your life is the most important decision you and I ever make.

I know that many people, of all ages, are still trying to decide what to do.

I know that the decision about what to do with your life isn't made once, but that there is a sense in which we all make it over and over again, sometimes dramatically, but more often than not, routinely, daily, when we decide to go to work, or go "there" instead of "here."

I know also that people live lives of dull unhappiness, quietly desperate unhappiness, because the decision about what to do with their lives turned out not to be a good one and they don't know how to unmake it, or for a variety of reasons, cannot unmake it. So I know there is a lot of unhappiness about this subject.

I know that the decision about what to do with your life is a theological decision, a religious decision whether or not you think of yourself as a religious person; a spiritual question even if sitting in a church thinking about it is not exactly how you ordinarily like to spend your Sunday morning. Because the decision about your life's work is about your values, your ultimate values, and ultimate commitments, and ultimate beliefs about who God is and who you are, and what the meaning is of the whole enterprise.

And I do know that it is never, never too late for any of us to decide what it is and to do it.... Your Life's Work.

One time, a man by the name of Isaiah went to church – to the temple. He had quite an experience! The building was filled with the mysterious smoke of incense, and there were angels that seemed to be flying about and there was glorious music that seemed like angels calling to one another; "Holy, Holy, Holy." The very foundations of the building shook and Isaiah saw God. "Woe is me," he said, for good reason because people often do not survive when they see God. But then Isaiah hears the voice of God asking a question: "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" And my guess is that Isaiah was just as surprised by what he heard next which was nothing other than his own voice saying, "Here am I. Send me!"

And another time, another man was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, talking with his friends and the crowd of people who were following him. And when the crowd became too large he stepped into the fishing boat of one of his closest friends, Peter, and proceeded to speak to the crowd from the boat. Later a peculiar thing happens, more mundane but just as peculiar as Isaiah's experience in the temple. The man instructs his friends, all of whom are in the boat now, to put down their net. "It's no use," Peter answers him. "We've fished all night and caught nothing." But they do it anyway and catch so many fish the net starts to break and when they call for help and start to load the fish on board, they get carried away – or greedy – and the boat begins to sink. And Peter says essentially what Isaiah said in the Temple, "Woe is me. Depart from me, Lord." Translate that – "something funny is going on here – something more personal than this big pile of fish." "Don't be afraid," Jesus said, "from now on you will catch people." Peter's life's work is emerging, just like Isaiah's, and he too must have been shocked to hear what he said next, which was a variation of "Here am I. Send me." "They left everything to follow him."

Deciding what your life's work is and deciding to do it is the most important decision you and I ever make.

Sometimes the opportunity for the decision comes suddenly and dramatically. I'm always deeply touched by the way young people have had to make the decision in war time and actually do it. I'm reading Stephen Ambrose's fine new book, *Citizen Soldiers*, the Second World War from the perspective of the young men who fought it. It is often the story of uncommon bravery and commitment and sacrifice by otherwise common young men, who, when the situation calls for it, do incredible things, give their lives away. Major Tom Howe, a mild-mannered teacher of English literature, finds himself leading a battalion whose job it is to break a log jam that has stopped the entire Allied invasion effort at Normandy. He takes the town of St. Lo and in the process of looking after his men when the Germans launch a counter-attack, is killed. His

men take his body to the rubble that was the church of Saint Croix, drape it with a flag and the GIs and a few citizens left adorn the site with flowers. [p 74-76]

Major Howe, at some point, knew what his life's work was and did it. For most of us, it isn't nearly that dramatic, or clear, and we think not nearly as critical in terms of our survival, although I am not so sure about that. Knowing what your life's work is and doing it can be very costly, but so can knowing and not doing it, or not knowing and no longer caring much, just putting in time, day after day until retirement.

Viktor Frankl, a Viennese psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz, wrote about it later and the relevance of his observations continues to intrigue me. Frankl observed that when men and women live without hope, when life has no meaningful goal except its end, life begins to dissolve ... strength dissipates, as does the all-important will to live. The will to survive was the key, Frankl observed, and that is related to some goal other than individual survival. He wrote:

> "Any attempt to restore a person's inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal. Nietzsche's words, 'One who has a <u>why</u> to live can bear almost any <u>how</u>,' could be the motto.... What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing ones. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answers to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual." [*Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 76-77]

Frankl discovered that a source of the power to survive, the will to live and not simply sitting around in despair, putting in time, waiting to die, was having a goal, a purpose. And that in that dreadful circumstance the life-giving, life-enhancing goal didn't need to be some lofty ambition, to write a symphony, or discover the cure for cancer, or establish freedom and justice for all. In that dreadful situation, the life-giving goal was to do what needed to be done now, here and now: to help this man, to share food with this woman, to comfort this child, to stop searching for big answers to big questions in order to do now what you have to do. The amazing discovery of those who observed and reflected on it later, was that the ones who could rise above what was happening to them by forces beyond their control, the ones who did what they had to do, not only seemed to live, they seemed to live more fully, began to talk with one another again and to remember and to write poetry and gather to sing songs: the children drew pictures, the musicians formed string quartets.

There is something about knowing what you need to do – knowing what your work is – that adds a spiritual depth to life, regardless of the circumstances in which it is being lived.

Sometimes our culture, with its values, does not help ... either in the discovery or the doing of our life's work. James Wall, editor of the *Christian Century*, remembers a time awhile ago when Duke Divinity School launched a university-wide seminar on the topic, *Search for Meaning* – because Duke's Fuqua School of Business had just published the results of a poll in which the vast majority of students responded to a question about what they wanted from the school by declaring: "Money, power and things."

That simply won't do for the long run. And to the degree that this culture of ours cannot come up with something better, something more life-giving, life enhancing, it is a culture sick at its very heart.

How about instead of "money, power and things," "peace, joy and justice?" How about "to learn how to live, to learn how to love, to learn the joy of responsible participation in a community?" "How about the enhancement of the life of our own dear ones, or one child?

What in the world is wrong with us, Wall asks, that we not only cannot understand but seem to be irritated by an ex-president who builds houses for the poor, searches for cures for exotic African diseases, plunges into the problems of urban slums in Atlanta? Jimmy Carter is ridiculed by the popular press. Wall says, "his critics cannot believe that anyone would do good for the sake of doing good – there must be some other explanation." [*Hidden Treasures*, p. 79]

It is at heart a religious issue. In the two texts this morning, Isaiah in the temple, Peter in the fishing boat, deep and profoundly moving and mysterious religious experience comes to two people and then leads to action. I'm always interested in the fact that the Bible is consistent about this: people are given powerful religious experiences, not as ends in themselves, but in order to get them to go to work, to do something.

> "Here am I. Send me."
> "They left everything and followed."

And so, for you and me, these moments together in worship, the inspiring aura of this space, the beauty of the music, the mysterious and energetic silence of corporate prayer – is given to us, for our comfort, assurance and edification, but also to transform us, and to push us in the direction of our life's work.

Now, this is not a seminary recruitment sermon. Not everyone can or should attend seminary and become clergy persons. In fact, some would argue that we have enough ministers already. What we really need are lots of people who see God's hand and purpose in what they are already doing, or what they are clearly gifted to do.

Author Dan Wakefield offers his own experience. In mid-career, Wakefield seemed to be sinking into depression, accompanied by drugs and alcohol. Six years of concentrated psychoanalysis made him angry, disillusioned. And then he met Dorothy Day – founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and a halfway house in the Bowery. Wakefield volunteered to help in the kitchen and wrote later about "a real mystique that called to young people, offering in the midst of the grim poverty of the Bowery something that all the glittering affluence around us lacked – a sense of purpose, a way of transcending self through service that those who came vividly remember." And Wakefield didn't become a social worker, but he did become an intentional Christian and returned to writing, his life's work, now with a sense that it was what God wanted him to do, had gifted him to, had given him to do.

Some need to drop everything and follow. But not all can. In fact, it is for those who cannot that this word is important; the desperately quiet, unhappy ones. You may not be able to leave your job to follow your dream. You have responsibilities and people depend on you and it may be that what you are doing that enables you to fulfill your responsibility and care for those who depend on you is, now – in this moment – your life's work. You may not be able to leave a relationship for a variety of reasons – even though leaving presents itself as a daily option and it may be that staying and doing what you have to do – now, in this moment, is your life's work.

And, of course, it may be that your life's work is to do just that, to leave everything to follow him, to say, in some way, "Here am I. Send me."

I do know this: part of the reason we are a church is to somehow stand together as each of us struggles with this matter and decides to go, or to stay, or to stay but also to go in some different direction, some more faithful, more creative, more life-giving way. I believe we are never more faithfully a church, a

community following Jesus, than when we pray for one another and stand with one another as we seek to know and to do our life's work.

This sermon began with Lorenzo Ghiberti, a medieval sculptor whose life's work was the creation of bronze doors for the Baptistry in Florence. I bring it to a close with a poem about a contemporary sculptor, a favorite of mine, Henry Moore. The poem is by Donald Hall (and in that I turned sixty last week, I liked it a lot.)

> "Moore was sixty when I
> met him. Before tea – when he had worked
> eight hours on maquettes,
> waxes, an eight-foot reclining figure
> in elmwood, and a
> monumental two-part shaped like the skull
> of an elephant...
>
> He like to repeat
> advice that Rodin gave to young sculptors:
> 'If you're working
> on a maquette, and it doesn't go right, don't
> keep picking at the clay,
> making little changes here and there.
> Drop it on the floor,
> See what it looks like then.' ...
>
> The last time I saw him,
> he was eighty. I asked him, 'Henry,
> what is the secret
> of life?' He didn't hesitate; he said:
> The secret is to devote
> your whole life to one ambition.
> Concentrate everything
> you know, everything you can summon,
> to accomplish this
> one desire. But remember: Choose something
> you can't do!' He laughed
> and coughed, shifting his weight in the wheelchair." [*The Old Life*, by Donald Hall, pp. 68-70]

It is the most important decision you and I can make.

It is a decision that you and I make every day.

It is a decision that can make us desperately unhappy or deeply and profoundly happy.

It is a decision we sometimes have to drop on the floor and see what it looks like and pick it up and change it and make it again.

It is a theological decision, a spiritual decision.

It happened, one time, 2500 years ago when a man said, without knowing, I suspect, where exactly it would lead … "Here am I. Send me."

It happened when Jesus Christ walked among us and called his friends, some of whom changed jobs and roles and most of whom did not, but all of whom he called to live more deeply, more radically, more lovingly, and some of them, women and men, left everything to follow him and some stayed right where they were and there found a way to leave everything and follow him.

May something very much like it happen to you.

Amen.